

The evolution of feminist consciousness in “female-oriented” online novels

Xinyue Xu

Jing Hengyi College of Education,
Hangzhou Normal University,
Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 311100, China

Abstract:

This paper examines female-oriented online novels to explore the evolution and complexity of female image construction and feminist consciousness. Analyzing works like *The Legend of Chu Qiao*, it finds female roles have shifted from dependent "innocent flowers" to independent "strong leads," showcasing women's growth in workplace and political strategy. However, feminist expression harbors contradictions: while these novels imagine gender equality through power reversal, they still rely on patriarchal elements like "divine destiny" and "offspring." Female awakening often remains tied to emotional dependency, diluting feminist goals via romanticized sacrifice. The study highlights both progress and compromise in online literature's feminist practices, noting it offers a virtual space for equality while constrained by cultural and market forces. It provides a cultural critique of contemporary gender consciousness shifts and reflects on popular literature's role in gender equality.

Keywords: Feminist consciousness; Female-oriented online novels; Gender representation; Strong female leads; Patriarchal critique

1 Introduction

In recent years, with growing societal attention to gender equality and women's rights, feminism and gender consciousness have gradually become hot topics. As an important component of popular culture, online literature not only reflects contemporary social and cultural changes but also shapes readers' values and gender concepts to some extent. Among them, female-oriented novels, a branch of female-oriented culture, aim to satisfy women's desires and will, embodying a writing trend where women create using their own discourse (Pan, 2024). By analyzing

the female images and gender consciousness in these novels, we can better understand the changes in contemporary women's social status and their perception of self-identity.

Feminism, as a social trend of thought, aims to strive for women's equal rights in social, political, economic, and other fields. With the dissemination of feminist ideas, women's self-consciousness has gradually awakened, which is fully reflected in literary works. Yirundan (2022) points out that female characters in online novels have undergone a transformation from "innocent flowers" to "strong female leads." Through innovations in narrative structure and thematic ex-

pression, these novels demonstrate women's growth trajectory from passivity and dependence to independence and autonomy, reflecting women's pursuit of self-worth in real society (Yi, 2022). However, despite the progress in expressing feminist consciousness in "female-oriented" online novels, their complexity and diversity cannot be ignored. Zhou Weiwei and Huang Xiaojun (2023) criticize the lack of gender equality consciousness in some works, noting that certain novels claiming to advocate female independence still hide the "domineering CEO" narrative mode. By creating male images who control economic power and discourse, these works satisfy readers' emotional needs while essentially reinforcing the patriarchal social structure. This disjunction between appearance and essence reveals the actual lack of gender equality consciousness in the texts (Zhou, Huang, 2023).

Additionally, Wang Wanbo (2018) reveals the internal paradox in the expression of feminist consciousness through an analysis of "female-dominated novels". As a special type of "female-oriented" online novels, "female-dominated novels" typically set a society dominated by women, where female characters hold absolute power and status. However, although this setting seemingly subverts the traditional gender power structure, in actual narration, female characters' power often relies on male recognition and support, thus weakening the genuine expression of feminist consciousness. This paradox reflects the dilemma of feminism in literary creation: while pursuing gender equality, it is difficult to completely break free from the constraints of traditional gender concepts.

Overall, the expression of feminist consciousness in "female-oriented" online novels presents complexity and diversity. This paper will explore the manifestations of feminist consciousness in different types of "female-oriented" online novels and their underlying socio-cultural meanings through analysis. By combing through existing literature and conducting in-depth analyses of works, it aims to reveal the transformation trajectory of female images and feminist consciousness in "female-oriented" online novels and discuss their practical significance and limitations in contemporary society.

2 The Transformation of Female Images

2.1 The social background of female image transformation

Since the early 1990s, with the deepening global awareness of gender equality and women's empowerment, feminist research has flourished. Scholars have dedicat-

ed themselves to exploring women's roles and status in social, cultural, political, and other fields, committing to revealing the injustices women have historically suffered and their unremitting struggles for rights. For example, Gao Ningxin (2025) has studied the feminist movement in 19th-century America, Wang Xiaohua (2021) has explored the changes in women's status in 20th-century British novels, and Aarathi Prasad (2025) has researched gender equality in health. These research achievements have not only promoted in-depth academic discussions on gender issues but also inspired more people to participate in the movement to promote gender equality.

Although traditional gender concepts remain deeply rooted in today's society, women's status and roles are undergoing subtle yet profound changes with the continuous progress of the times. On the one hand, despite the widespread acceptance of the slogan "gender equality," the social reality of a male-centered socio-cultural system formed over thousands of years will not change significantly in the short term, and women still find themselves in a relatively vulnerable position (Wang, 2021). This gender inequality has led women to proactively change their images for self-defense, seeking more protection and respect in society. They may do so by dressing fashionably, wearing makeup, or using clothing to highlight their individuality, all as means to assert themselves and strive for more voice.

On the other hand, although women have achieved some success in the workplace, they often still face dual responsibilities from family and society. In patriarchal societies, women are not only burdened with household chores but also tasked with caring for family members and handling various social relationships. Due to physical differences, women are generally at a disadvantage in physical strength, meaning they often need more support and protection from men. As a result, women may easily develop a psychological dependence on men during their growth, affecting their ability to live independently.

In the creation of "female-oriented" online novels, these social realities are ingeniously integrated. Thanks to the development of the internet, women finally have a relatively private shared space for viewing and communication, temporarily breaking free from the powerful inertia of gender order (Fan, 2021). Authors are no longer satisfied with depicting traditional "female" roles but attempt to create new images that possess both "femininity" and modern female characteristics through vivid portrayals of gender-specific roles. These novels typically feature rich plots, distinct characters, and engaging storylines, aiming to convey values of confidence, independence, and self-improvement to female readers. No longer merely entertainment products, they have become platforms for

women to express themselves and explore gender issues. In these works, women can find resonance and feel their value and strength as females. Meanwhile, they also promote the concept of gender equality, encouraging women to bravely express their views and feelings.

2.2 From “innocent flowers” to “strong female leads”

With the rise of feminist thought, feminist literary works have received increasing attention, and “female-oriented” online novels have gradually come into the spotlight. These works center on female protagonists, creating a series of female images different from the traditional “innocent flower” type.

In early literary works, female-oriented novels were influenced by romantic novels from Taiwan and Hong Kong, popularizing love stories with themes like “sadistic love” and “domineering CEOs” (Yan, 2025). The “innocent flower” female image was relatively common: they had beautiful appearances, innocent and pure hearts, kind and talented personalities, and optimistic and tenacious attitudes toward life. However, they were also delicate and vulnerable, facing numerous difficulties and setbacks in life, and could only escape hardship and achieve happiness with the love and help of male protagonists (Yi, 2022). For example, Ruoxi in *Bu Bu Jing Xin* (Startling by Each Step) is intelligent but ultimately unable to escape the manipulation of fate. From the beginning, she is destined to go through twists and turns, loved by the Fourth Prince and hurt by the Eighth Prince. This plot setting is a typical feature of the “innocent flower,” evoking a sense of pity.

However, with the development of online literature, the “strong female lead” type of female image began to appear in online novels. Compared with the “innocent flower,” the “strong female lead” image has richer connotations and traits. They can wield wealth and power with their exceptional intelligence, completing self-growth and transformation through a “level-up” narrative (Yi, 2022). They not only have independent and self-reliant qualities but also demonstrate resilience, determination, and a broad vision. Taking *The Legend of Chu Qiao* as an example, Chu Qiao is not only highly skilled in martial arts but also has independent thoughts and initiative. She is not bound by the traditional patriarchal society and dares to challenge conventions and authority. Such female images represent contemporary female readers’ redefinition of self-worth and active pursuit of equal rights.

2.3 The diversification of female images

Online novels tend to present more diverse female images

compared to traditional novels, reflecting the similarity in the fates and circumstances of women with different external characteristics. Characters are portrayed more vividly, with distinct personality traits, better representing the diversity and individuality of contemporary women (Hong, 2024). In traditional literature, female images generally appear as positive roles, endowed with multiple identities and missions. With the rise of feminist thought, female images are no longer merely accessories in male discourse but gradually acquire independent personalities. In “female-oriented” online novels, as the portrayal of female images deepens, they begin to exhibit diverse characteristics. For example, in the novel *Fuyao*, the female protagonist Fuyao grows from a humble maid to a powerful queen. Her resilience, wisdom, and independence break the stereotypes of traditional female roles. Through Fuyao’s growth journey, the work demonstrates women’s spirit of constantly breaking through themselves and pursuing equality and freedom in adversity.

Another work, *The King’s Avatar*, features Su Mucheng, representing the image of a career woman. She is not only a top player in the game but also holds a crucial role in the team, showcasing women’s exceptional abilities in professional fields. Su Mucheng’s image breaks the traditional narrative that women can only rely on men, highlighting women’s independence and competitiveness in the workplace. Additionally, Sheng Minglan in *The Story of Minglan* is a counter-traditional female character. On the surface, she is gentle and compliant, but inwardly, she is resilient and strategic, using her wisdom to survive and ultimately find happiness in complex family and social environments. Sheng Minglan’s image reflects women’s struggles and growth between tradition and modernity.

The female characters in these works each have unique characteristics, including powerful “strong female leads,” wise and introverted counter-traditional women, and elite career women. Their diverse images not only meet the emotional needs of different female readers but also reflect the diversified development of contemporary women’s social roles. It can be seen that female images in “female-oriented” online novels have evolved from monotony to diversity, from passivity to initiative, demonstrating the awakening and growth of female consciousness.

3 The Expression and Complexity of Feminism

3.1 The expression of feminist consciousness

In “female-oriented” online novels, female network writers have broken through the stereotypical mold of female

image construction in traditional novels. They often express feminist consciousness by creating independent female characters and subverting traditional gender narratives (Li, 2016). For example, Chu Qiao in *The Legend of Chu Qiao* grows from a humble female slave to a female general leading an army. She refuses to rely on men and strives for freedom and dignity through her own wisdom and martial prowess. Her independence is not merely a label of status change but is demonstrated through a series of actions that break gender norms: in the desperate situation of the hunting ground, she, as a female slave, kills a vicious wolf with her bare hands, tearing apart the stereotype of “delicate women” with the bloody rules of survival. Facing the oppression of noble families, she refuses to be the “appendage” under Prince Yan Xun’s protection, sneaking into the enemy camp alone to steal military talismans and leading the “Defense of Hongchuan City” with military strategy—she not only designs a fire attack trap to rout the enemy but also awakens the fighting will of female soldiers with the declaration, “Taking one step back today means millions of women taking ten thousand steps back tomorrow.” Her sword, “Canhong” (Broken Rainbow), runs through the story, serving not only as a symbol of martial power but also as a metaphor for her edge in cutting through gender shackles. Through Chu Qiao’s growth journey, the novel conveys women’s strong will to pursue equality and resist oppression, embodying the core spirit of feminism.

Another example is Wei Yingluo in *Story of Yanxi Palace*, who reconstructs the female power path through “anti-palace intrigue logic.” Upon entering the palace, she uses the mechanism in her “lotus-embroidered shoes” to counterattack the matron who bullies her, demonstrating survival wisdom of overcoming force with strategy. When the Empress advises her to “be gentle and submissive,” she subverts traditional female virtue narratives with, “Yingluo does not believe in fate but only in cause and effect.” The most subversive event is the “Thunder Strike on Consort Yu” incident: when she discovers the royal family covering up the perpetrator of a sexual assault case, she does not choose to endure or rely on male power but meticulously calculates the thunderstorm time and uses copper wires to guide lightning for “divine punishment,” transforming feudal divine power into a tool for female revenge. This act of weaponizing natural scientific knowledge completely breaks free from the old model of harem women “plotting through imperial favor,” constructing female subjectivity based on reason and technology. Both characters prove with their vivid action logic that female autonomy lies not only in the result of status advancement but also in the specific methodology of breaking gender constraints.

Furthermore, as a unique genre, “female-dominated novels” push feminist consciousness to a more extreme expression. For example, *The True Color of a Female Emperor* constructs a world where women are supreme, with the female protagonist as the empress ruling the court, while male characters are in subordinate positions. This setting directly reverses the real-world gender power structure, satisfying female readers’ imagination of an equal or female-dominated society. Although such works hardly establish a legitimate “female-strong, male-weak” model, and the “male-weak, female-strong” dynamic has no real-world relevance for female readers, appearing more like a game-like act of retaliation (Xiao, 2016), they clearly express women’s desire for power, autonomy, and social status through exaggerated narrative techniques.

These cases show that “female-oriented” online novels are conveying feminist ideas in diverse ways. Whether through female struggle stories in real-world settings or gender role reversals in imaginary worlds, they echo contemporary women’s pursuit of equality, freedom, and the right to speak to varying degrees.

3.2 The complexity of feminism

The expression of feminism in “female-oriented” online novels is always torn between tradition and modernity. Empress Ruyi in *Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace*, who pursues equal love, confronts imperial autocracy by “cutting her hair in protest,” seemingly demonstrating the edge of female awakening. However, a closer look reveals that the capital for her resistance still stems from the “empress” identity granted by the patriarchal system. When she kneels on the cold stone slab of the cold palace after removing her splendid attire, the stripped phoenix robe becomes an irony—the closer women’s power is to the peak of the feudal system, the more it exposes its parasitic nature. This contradiction reappears in a more absurd form in the female-dominated world of *The Princess Weiyoung*: although Princess Chu Yu’s dragon robe and crown subvert gender symbols, the legitimacy of her rule still relies on “divine prophecy” and the wisdom of male advisors, as if in a mirrored inversion, still reflecting the traditional power structure of “male wisdom, female status.”

This narrative dilemma often coincides with the erosion of emotional politics. Ruyi’s awakening ultimately drowns in the whirlpool of emotional games between the emperor and empress. Chu Yu relinquishes half of the country to protect her lover, and the female protagonist of *The Rebirth of an Ill-Fated Lady* returns to the patriarchal system with the oath of “protecting the marquis estate” after breaking feudal primogeniture with modern contract marriage. When female independent consciousness is

woven into the romantic narrative of “sacrifice for love,” power concession is gilded with a solemn and stirring aura. These works collectively guide the female growth trajectory into a closed loop of “awakening-immersion.” Under the seemingly lofty feminist banner, it is actually the ingenious co-optation of gender issues by consumerism—female resistance becomes a plot device to stimulate readers’ sense of satisfaction, yet it cannot break free from the narrative inertia of emotional dependence.

Deeper contradictions lie in the ambiguity between deconstruction and reconstruction. The collision between modern workplace thinking and courtyard intrigue logic in *The Rebirth of an Ill-Fated Lady* is highly symbolic: the female protagonist uses KPI assessments to manage backyard servants, deconstructing traditional master-servant relationships with performance systems, yet still relies on the ancient rule of “giving birth to legitimate sons” to consolidate her status. This hybrid survival strategy of old and new reveals the cultural eclecticism in gender consciousness transformation. The sexual political rituals in the imaginary world of *The Princess Weiyoung* are even more paradoxical: the female-dominated dynasty retains old systems like “Phoenix Lord Consort’s bedchamber service” and “equal distribution of favor,” reducing the gender power revolution to a role-playing game. When Chu Yu strategizes in court but still faces questioning about “offspring inheritance,” the so-called female-dominated world is nothing but a mirrored reflection of the patriarchal structure.

These works collectively reveal a profound phenomenon: the expression of feminism in online literature often oscillates between breakthrough and compromise. When creators attempt to construct female-led narratives, they still struggle to fully escape the mindset of patriarchal culture; while criticizing gender inequality, they unconsciously reproduce certain gender stereotypes. This complexity is a true reflection of the development of female consciousness in society’s transition period, reflecting both progress and limitations.

4 Conclusion

This study analyzes “female-oriented” online novels to reveal the complex evolution of feminist consciousness in contemporary online literature. Female images have shifted from the traditional “innocent flower” of weak dependence to more subjective “strong female lead” narratives. Diverse images such as maids who rise to power, career elites, and tactful strategists reflect women’s diversified exploration of social roles. However, this progress is always intertwined with structural contradictions: while “female-dominated novels” reverse gender power,

they rely on patriarchal cores like “divine prophecy” and “inheritance through offspring”; works like Ruyi’s *Royal Love in the Palace* and *The Rebirth of an Ill-Fated Lady* embed female awakening within a framework of emotional dependence, diluting feminist demands through romanticized sacrifice narratives. This contradiction reveals the dual dilemma of feminist expression in online literature—both attempting to break free from traditional constraints and struggling to escape the regulation of cultural inertia or market logic.

This study shows that online literature, as a carrier of popular culture, plays a dual role in the dissemination of gender concepts. On the one hand, through “strong female lead” narratives, it provides women with a virtual space to imagine equality and autonomy, becoming an important medium for contemporary women to explore identity. On the other hand, the implicit compromises in the texts reveal the practical dilemmas of feminism in popular culture, offering reflective cases for gender research.

The limitations of this study include its focus on mainstream IP works, which may overlook innovative expressions in niche subgenres; insufficient analysis of reader reception, failing to reveal how audiences interact with the texts; and an underexplored theoretical framework that does not fully incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives. Future research could expand into the study of “female-oriented” subgenres, combine reader ethnography to analyze the interaction mechanism between audience gender concepts and texts, and introduce tools like post-colonial theory and affect politics to reveal the complex interplay between feminist consciousness, capital, and technology. Cross-cultural comparisons could further deepen the understanding of the uniqueness of local gender discourse. Only through multi-dimensional exploration can we more comprehensively evaluate the potential and limitations of online literature in the gender equality process.

References

- Fan, Y. 2021. Research on Female-Oriented Online Novels. Master’s thesis, Sichuan International Studies University.
- Gao, N. 2025. Ernestine Rose and the Development of the American Feminist Movement in the 19th Century. *Journal of Historical Studies* (04):80-94.
- Hong, Y. 2024. Construction of Heroine Images in Online Love Novels and Their Realistic Reflections-From a Feminist Perspective. *Popular Literature and Art* (18):19-21
- Li, H. 2016. Exploration of Female Consciousness in Online Female Literature. Master’s thesis, Anhui University.
- Pan, H. 2024. Research on Female Images and Realis-

- tic Value in Female-Oriented Online Novels. *Journal of Shanxi Institute of Energy* 37(06).
- Wang, W. 2018. Feminist Consciousness and Its Paradox in “Female-Oriented” Online Novels-An Analysis with “Female-Dominated Novels” as an Example. *Online Literature Review* (02).
- Wang, X. 2021. From Equal Rights Consciousness to Self-Consciousness-Changes in Women’s Subject Status in 20th-Century British Novels. *Journal of Northwest Minzu University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* (02):166-173.
- Xiao, Y. 2016. Gender Experiments in “Female-Oriented” Online Literature-Taking Danmei Novels as an Example. *Research of Chinese Modern Literature* (08):39-46.
- Yan, B. 2025. Moral Issues in Female-Oriented Online Literature-Taking Two “Strong Female Lead” Online Literary Works as Examples. *Literary Theory and Criticism* (01):152-163.
- Yi, R. 2022. From “Innocent Flower” to “Strong Female Lead”-An Analysis of the Changes in Female Images in “Female-Oriented” Online Novels. *Journal of Sichuan University of Arts and Science* 32(06).
- Zhou, W., Huang, X. 2023. “Can I Push You to the Ground?”-Emotional Catharsis in Female-Oriented Online Literature and the Absence of Gender Equality Consciousness. *Journal of North University of China (Social Science Edition)* 39(01).